

APPLICATION
FOR
UNITED STATES PATENT

TITLE: **WIRELESS VEHICLE-MONITORING SYSTEM OPERATING ON BOTH
TERRESTRIAL AND SATELLITE NETWORKS**

INVENTOR: MATTHEW BANET
LARKIN LOWREY
PAUL WASHICKO
MICHAEL O'BRIEN

ASSIGNEE: REYNOLDS & REYNOLDS HOLDINGS, INC.

ATTORNEY: STEPHEN C. GLAZIER
Kirkpatrick & Lockhart LLP
1800 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-778-9000
Reg. No. 31,361

CERTIFICATE OF MAILING BY EXPRESS MAIL

Express Mail Label No. ET801840034US

I hereby certify under 37 CFR §1.10 that this correspondence is being deposited with the United States Postal Service as Express Mail Post Office to Addressee with sufficient postage on the date indicated below and is addressed to the Commissioner of Patents, P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, VA 22313-1450.

July 24, 2003
Date of Deposit

Carlo Cotrone
Signature

Carlo Cotrone
Typed or Printed Name of Person Signing Certificate

WIRELESS VEHICLE-MONITORING SYSTEM OPERATING ON BOTH TERRESTRIAL AND SATELLITE NETWORKS

BACKGROUND

1. Field

[0001] Embodiments of the present invention relate generally to vehicle telematics. More specifically, embodiments relate to wireless, internet-based systems that collect, transmit, and analyze diagnostic and location-based data from a motor vehicle.

2. Description of Related Art

[0002] Telematics systems typically collect data from a remote vehicle and wirelessly transmit these data to a central computer system. The computer system then analyzes the data to monitor the vehicle. Conventional telematics systems collect diagnostic data, measured from the host vehicle's engine computer, and location-based data, measured with a global positioning system (GPS).

[0003] Telematics systems that monitor light-duty automobiles and trucks beginning with model year 1996 measure data from the vehicle's on-board diagnostic (OBD-II) system. OBD-II systems, as mandated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), monitor the vehicle's electrical, mechanical, and emissions systems and generate data that are processed by an engine control unit (ECU) to detect malfunctions or deterioration in the vehicle's performance. Communication protocols used to access OBD-II data include J1850 PWM (Ford vehicles), J1850 VPWM (General Motors), ISO 9141-2 (Toyota), KWP2000 (Hyundai, Mercedes), and CAN (proposed for next-generation vehicles). Data monitored with these protocols typically include parameters such as vehicle speed (VSS), engine speed (RPM), engine load (LOAD), and mass air flow (MAF). The ECU can also generate diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs), which are 5-digit codes (e.g., 'P0001') indicating electrical/mechanical problems with

the vehicle. Most vehicles manufactured after 1996 include a standardized, 16-cavity serial connector that makes these data available. This OBD-II connector serially communicates with the vehicle's ECU and typically lies underneath the vehicle's dashboard.

[0004] The primary communication protocol for collecting diagnostic data from medium and heavy-duty trucks is called J1708/J1587 (referred to herein as 'J1708'). This communication protocol, which originated in 1988, typically accesses a set of data that is much larger than that available from light-duty cars and trucks. Most medium and heavy-duty trucks include a 6-cavity connector, which connects to the truck's engine computer to make these data available.

[0005] A variety of wireless networks can transmit diagnostic and GPS data from a vehicle's telematics device to the central computer system. Terrestrial networks, i.e. networks with terrestrial base stations or transmitting towers, include CDMA networks (managed by Sprint and Verizon), GSM/GPRS networks (ATT, T-Mobile), Mobitex (Cingular), DataTac (Motient), and Reflex (Arch Pagenet, Weblink Wireless). These networks typically have good coverage within a given country's major population centers, but poor coverage in rural, unpopulated areas. And individual terrestrial networks typically do not offer coverage in multiple countries. Satellite networks (managed, e.g., by Orbcomm or Globalstar) typically transmit data with lower bandwidth and higher costs compared to terrestrial networks, but offer near-worldwide coverage.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] FIG. 1 is a schematic drawing of a wireless appliance according to an embodiment of the present invention featuring modems that independently operate on satellite and terrestrial networks.

[0007] FIG. 2 is a schematic drawing of a wireless appliance according to an embodiment of the present invention featuring modems that independently operate on satellite and terrestrial networks, a GPS, and a vehicle-communication system that communicates with multiple types of vehicle buses.

[0008] FIG. 3A is a schematic drawing of a system according to an embodiment of the invention that collects diagnostic and GPS data from a vehicle and transmits these data through either a satellite or terrestrial network to a central computer system.

[0009] FIG. 3B is a schematic drawing of a gateway software piece according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0010] FIG. 4 is a screen capture of a web page that displays a vehicle's diagnostic data monitored by the wireless appliance of FIG. 1 according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0011] FIGS. 5A and 5B are web pages displaying, respectively, screen captures of a vehicle's numerical latitude and longitude and a map showing the vehicle's location monitored by the wireless appliance of FIG. 1 according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0012] FIG. 6 is a schematic drawing of a satellite-based wireless appliance installed in a host vehicle according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 7 is a flowchart of a process used by a wireless appliance to select a network for transmitting diagnostic and/or location-based data packets according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] FIG. 8 is a schematic drawing of a wireless appliance according to an embodiment of the present invention featuring an interface board that connects a terrestrial modem to a satellite modem.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0015] The following description refers to the accompanying drawings that illustrate certain embodiments of the present invention. Other embodiments are possible and modifications may be made to the embodiments without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Therefore, the following detailed description is not meant to limit the present invention. Rather, the scope of the present invention is defined by the appended claims.

[0016] Embodiments of the present invention provide a small-scale, wireless, internet-based system for monitoring and analyzing a vehicle's GPS and diagnostic data. Specific embodiments provide a system that supports the above-mentioned functions using a wireless appliance that features a first modem operating on a terrestrial network, and a second modem operating on a satellite network. The wireless appliance includes a microprocessor that, for a given location, determines the coverage of the terrestrial and/or satellite networks, analyzes the coverage, and selects a modem and network for data transmission, and then transmits the data accordingly. This results in a cost-efficient system that can monitor remote vehicles with essentially worldwide coverage.

[0017] The wireless appliance monitors location and diagnostic data to provide services such as remote determination of a vehicle's mechanical and/or electrical condition, roadside assistance to a disabled vehicle, or recovery of a stolen vehicle. In a related implementation, the appliance provides a GPS-based system for alerting a vehicle's owner that someone other than the owner has moved the vehicle (e.g., the vehicle has been stolen or towed).

[0018] More specifically, in one aspect, the invention provides a wireless appliance for monitoring a vehicle that features a microprocessor configured to select a vehicle-communication protocol of a host vehicle, and then communicate with the host vehicle through the vehicle-communication protocol. The appliance includes a vehicle-communication circuit,

in electrical communication with the microprocessor, that collects diagnostic data from the host vehicle using the vehicle-communication protocol. A GPS module, also in electrical communication with the microprocessor, generates location-based data. For transmitting these data, the appliance includes a first wireless transmitter operating on a terrestrial network and a second wireless transmitter operating on a satellite network. The microprocessor is further configured to select the first or second wireless transmitter for transmitting the diagnostic and location-based data.

[0019] In another aspect, the invention provides a wireless appliance that includes a microprocessor, a GPS module, and the above-described first and second wireless transmitters. In this embodiment, the wireless transmitters transmit location-based data to an Internet-accessible website.

[0020] In various embodiments, the vehicle-communication circuit of the wireless appliance includes modules for managing different vehicle-communication protocols, e.g. J1850 PWM (a protocol for Ford vehicles), J1850 VPWM (General Motors), ISO 9141-2 (Toyota and other Japanese makes), CAN (e.g. ISO-15765; a next-generation protocol), Keyword 2000 (Hyundai, Mercedes), and J1708 (for medium and heavy-duty trucks).

[0021] The microprocessor may run firmware that determines the vehicle-communication protocol of a host vehicle. Once this is determined, the microprocessor may select the appropriate module in the vehicle-communication circuit that supports the vehicle-communication protocol.

[0022] The wireless appliance can also include an internal battery. In this embodiment, the appliance receives power from the vehicle's standard 12-volt battery and uses the internal battery as a back-up power supply in case this power is interrupted. In another embodiment, the appliance includes a single chipset that includes both the GPS module and both of the wireless transmitters.

[0023] In another aspect of the invention, the wireless appliance features a microprocessor that controls and processes data from both the vehicle-communication circuit and the GPS module. In this case, the GPS module receives GPS signals from an antenna and generates data (e.g., a GPS 'fix' that includes the vehicle's latitude, longitude, altitude, heading, and speed) in response. The GPS module then sends the data to the microprocessor to calculate location-based data. In this embodiment, both the GPS and radio antennae may be housed with the wireless appliance in a single enclosure. In other embodiments, a single chipset or ASIC includes both the GPS module and both the wireless transmitters.

[0024] The invention has many advantages. In particular, embodiments according to the invention make it possible to monitor diagnostic and location-based data from a vehicle located virtually anywhere in the world. These data are transmitted in real-time to an Internet-accessible website, which makes it possible to characterize the vehicle's performance and determine its location from virtually any location that has Internet access.

[0025] The satellite and terrestrial modems can be integrated into a single chipset or application-specific integrated circuit ('ASIC') to reduce both the cost and size of the wireless appliance. The ASIC may also include a microcontroller (e.g., an ARM7 microcontroller), computer memory, and the GPS. In this way a small, compact housing can enclose the wireless appliance. This makes it possible to hide the appliance in a host vehicle, thus making it unnoticeable to a thief during theft of the vehicle.

[0026] Diagnostic and location-based data, when analyzed together, can improve conventional services such as roadside assistance, vehicle theft notification and recovery, and remote diagnostics. For example, the data can indicate a vehicle's location, its fuel level and battery voltage, and whether or not it has any active DTCs. With these data a call center can dispatch a tow truck with the appropriate materials (e.g., extra gasoline or tools required to repair a specific problem) to repair the vehicle accordingly.

[0027] A wireless appliance according to embodiments of the present invention can also be easily transferred from one vehicle to another, or easily replaced if it malfunctions. No additional wiring is required to install the appliance; it is powered through the vehicle's OBD-II or J1708 connector and using a back-up battery. The appliance can also be connected directly to a vehicle's electrical system, thus making it unnecessary to even use the above-mentioned connectors.

[0028] Embodiments of the present invention may be useful in a wide range of vehicles. Examples of such vehicles include automobiles and trucks, as well as commercial equipment, medium and heavy-duty trucks, construction vehicles (e.g., front-end loaders, bulldozers, forklifts), powered sport vehicles (e.g., motorboats, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, jet skis, and other powered sport vehicles), collision repair vehicles, marine vehicles, and recreational vehicles. Further, embodiments may be useful in the vehicle care industry.

[0029] Although diagnostic systems operating under OBD-II and J1708 communication protocols are disclosed herein for illustrative purposes, it is to be appreciated that embodiments of the present invention may be employed with other systems.

[0030] FIG. 1 is a schematic drawing of a wireless appliance 10 according to an embodiment of the present invention. The wireless appliance 10 features a data-generating portion 15 that generates diagnostic and location-based data from a host vehicle 12, and a data-processing portion 17 that receives and processes these data. The data-processing portion 17 additionally formats the data for wireless transmission through a data-transmitting portion 18 to an Internet-accessible central computer system, described in more detail below. A power-management portion 19 powers the data-generating 15, data-processing 17, and data-transmitting 18 portions.

[0031] The data-transmitting portion 18 features a wireless terrestrial modem 31 that transmits data through a first antenna 33 to a terrestrial network, and a wireless satellite modem 42 that transmits data through a second antenna 43 to a satellite network. To determine the appropriate network for transmission, the data-processing portion 17 analyzes the location-based wireless coverage provided by the terrestrial and satellite networks. In one implementation, the analysis may include analyzing radio-frequency signal strengths, indicating the location-based coverage of each network, as detected by the first 33 and second 43 antennae.

[0032] Terrestrial networks typically offer higher bandwidths and lower transmission costs compared to satellite networks. Data is therefore sent over terrestrial networks if the data-processing portion 17 determines such networks offer sufficient coverage. If the coverage provided by the terrestrial network is insufficient, the data-processing portion 17 sends the data over the satellite network, which offers worldwide coverage.

[0033] In an embodiment, the first 33 and/or second 43 antennae may include a decal or patch antenna. For example, the wireless satellite modem 42 of FIG. 1 may be connected to a decal antenna. The decal antenna may be inconspicuously affixed to a surface of a host vehicle, such as a window.

[0034] FIG. 2 shows a more detailed embodiment of the wireless appliance 10 of FIG. 1. The data-generating portion 15 features a chipset-based GPS module 20 that receives wireless signals from orbiting GPS satellites through an integrated GPS antenna 21. To reduce cabling in the wireless appliance 10 and costs associated with its installation, the integrated GPS antenna 21 may attach to a metal ground plane within the appliance. Once the antenna 21 receives signals from at least three satellites, the GPS module 20 processes the signals to calculate a GPS fix that features the host vehicle's location and heading. The GPS module 20 calculates location-based data at a programmable interval, e.g. every minute.

[0035] The data-generating portion 15 communicates with the host vehicle through an electrical/mechanical interface 23 that connects to the host vehicle's 16-cavity OBD-II diagnostic connector (for light-duty cars and trucks) or 6-cavity J1708 diagnostic connector (for medium and heavy-duty trucks). The diagnostic connector, typically located underneath the vehicle's steering column, provides direct access to diagnostic data stored in memory in the vehicle's ECU. The data-generating portion 15 features a vehicle-communication circuit 25 that communicates with the host vehicle through an electrical/mechanical interface 23 with separate modules 25a-25f for different vehicle buses (e.g., those featured in Ford, GM, Toyota, Hino). The vehicle-communication circuit 25 can be integrated into a single ASIC wherein each module 25a-25f is a separate integrated circuit. Example implementations of these modules are described in copending United States patent application Serial No. 10/431,947, filed May 8, 2003, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0036] The vehicle-communication circuit 25 can additionally include logic that detects the communication protocol of the host vehicle, and then selects this protocol to communicate with the vehicle. Once the protocol is selected, the electrical/mechanical interface 23 receives diagnostic data from the vehicle and passes it through the vehicle-communication circuit 25 to the data-processing portion 17 for analysis.

[0037] It is to be appreciated that the specific protocols supported by the vehicle-communication circuit 25 of FIG. 2 are merely examples. In some embodiments, more, fewer, or other protocols may be supported by a vehicle-communication circuit.

[0038] The data-processing portion 17 features a 16-bit ARM7 microprocessor 27 that receives and processes diagnostic data from the vehicle-communication circuit 25 and location-based data from the GPS module 20. For example, the microprocessor 27 can process diagnostic data describing the host vehicle's speed, mass air flow, and malfunction indicator light to calculate, respectively, an odometer reading, fuel efficiency, and emission status.

[0039] The microprocessor 27 additionally stores firmware and pre and/or post-processed diagnostic data in a memory module 29. The memory module 29 may additionally store an operating system (e.g., Linux) that runs on the microprocessor 27. During operation, the memory module 29 can additionally function as a data logger where diagnostic and location-based data are captured at high rates (e.g., every 200 milliseconds) and then read out at a later time.

[0040] With firmware the microprocessor 27 determines whether to use the satellite modem 42 or terrestrial modem 31 to transmit the data. The microprocessor 27 determines this by analyzing the coverage of the associated terrestrial or satellite networks. The microprocessor 27 then formats the diagnostic and location-based data into separate packets and serially transfers these packets through a modem adaptor 35, which in turn routes the packets to the appropriate wireless modem. The modem adaptor 35 provides power, mechanical support, and a serial interface to both the wireless terrestrial modem 31 and satellite modem 42 through a multi-pin mechanical connector 37. Each formatted packet includes, e.g., a header that describes its destination and the wireless modem's numerical identity (e.g., a phone or serial number) and a payload that includes the data. Once transmitted, the packets propagate through the network, which delivers them to an Internet-accessible website, for example, as described in more detail with reference to FIG. 3A.

[0041] The power-management portion 19 of the wireless appliance 10 features a power supply and power-conditioning electronics 39 that receive 12 volts DC power from the electrical/mechanical interface 23 and, in turn, supply regulated DC power to circuit elements in the data-generating 15 and data-processing 17 portions. Typically the 12 volts is from the vehicle's battery and is switched to a lower voltage, e.g., 3.3-5 volts, to power the circuit elements. The mechanical interface 23, in turn, attaches to the host vehicle's diagnostic connector, which receives power directly from the vehicle's battery. An internal battery 41

connects to the power supply and power-conditioning electronics 39 and supplies power in case the wireless appliance is disconnected from the vehicle's power-supplying diagnostic connector. Additionally, the power supply and power-conditioning electronics 39 can continually recharge the internal battery 41 so that it can supply back-up power even after extended use.

[0042] FIG. 3A shows a schematic drawing of an Internet-based system 52 that uses the above-described wireless appliance 10, or related embodiments thereof, to monitor both diagnostic and location-based data from a host vehicle 12. In the embodiment shown in the figure, the wireless appliance 10 connects to a host vehicle's OBD-II diagnostic connector 51 and collects diagnostic data by querying the vehicle's ECU 55 through a cable 56. In response to a query, the ECU 55 retrieves data stored in its memory and sends it along the same cable 56 back to the wireless appliance 10. The GPS module in the wireless appliance 10 measures the vehicle's location-based data using an antenna 21 that is typically integrated into the wireless appliance or hidden within the vehicle (e.g., under the vehicle's dashboard). To calculate the vehicle's location, the antenna 21 collects signals 62 from an overlying constellation of GPS satellites 60 and sends these signals 62 to the GPS module for processing.

[0043] During operation, the wireless appliance 10 formats the diagnostic and GPS data in separate data packets. Using a first antenna 33, the wireless appliance determines the coverage provided by a terrestrial network 54 featuring a terrestrial base station 61. If this coverage is sufficient the wireless appliance 10 transmits the formatted packets through the terrestrial network 54. Alternatively, if the coverage provided by the terrestrial network 54 is not sufficient, the wireless appliance 10 transmits the formatted packets through a satellite network 75 featuring at least one data-transmitting satellite 74.

[0044] Once received by either the terrestrial 54 or satellite 75 networks, the data packets propagate to a gateway software piece 55 running on a central computer system 57. Using the gateway software piece 55, the central computer system 57 processes and stores data from the

data packets in a database 63. The central computer system 57 additionally may host a website 66 that, once accessed, displays the data. A user (e.g. an individual working for a call center) accesses the website 66 with a secondary computer system 69 through the Internet 67. The central computer system 57 may also include a data-processing component 68 that processes data in the database 63 to further characterize the vehicle 12.

[0045] FIG. 3B is a schematic drawing of an embodiment of the gateway software piece 55 of FIG. 3A. The gateway software piece 55 includes a first software adapter 58 and a second software adapter 59. The first software adapter 58 receives and processes incoming data packets from a point-of-presence (POP) of the terrestrial network 54, and reformats the processed data in a predetermined format. The format is compatible with that of the database 63 or another such database used by the central computer system 57. In an embodiment, the reformatted data is stored in the database 63 or other memory locations.

[0046] The second software adapter 59 receives and processes incoming data packets from a POP of the satellite network 75, and reformats the processed data in the same format used by the first software adapter 58 for incoming data packets. The reformatted data may be stored in the database 63.

[0047] The first software adapter 58 may also format outgoing data packets from the central computer system 57 in a format associated with the terrestrial network 54. Similarly, the second software adapter 59 may format outgoing data packets in a format associated with the satellite network 75. In an embodiment, the gateway software piece 55 may select the terrestrial network 54 or satellite network 75 for data transmission applying similar processes as those applied in the wireless appliance 10.

[0048] FIG. 4 shows a sample web page 130 included in the website of FIG. 3A, for example, that displays diagnostic data collected from the ECU of a particular vehicle as described above. The web page 130 includes a set of diagnostic data 131 and features fields

listing, for example, an acronym 132, value and units 134, and brief description 136 for each datum. During typical operation, the wireless appliance automatically transmits sets of diagnostic data 131 like the one shown in FIG. 3A at periodic intervals, e.g. every 20 to 40 minutes. The wireless appliance can also transmit similar data sets at random time intervals or in response to a query from the host computer system (sometimes called a ping).

[0049] FIGS. 5A and 5B show sample web pages 150, 152 included in the website of FIG. 3A, for example, that display, respectively, GPS data 154 and a map 158 that together indicate a vehicle's location 156. In this case, the GPS data 154 include the vehicle's latitude, longitude, and a reverse geocode of these data indicating a corresponding street address, the nearest cross street, and a status of the vehicle's ignition (i.e., 'on' or 'off' and whether or not the vehicle is parked or moving). The map 158 displays these coordinates in a graphical form relative to an area of, in this case, a few square miles. In typical embodiments, the web pages 150, 152 are rendered each time the GPS data are periodically transmitted from a vehicle (e.g., every 1-2 minutes) and received by the data-processing component of the website. Both the map and a database that translates the latitude and longitude into a reverse geocode are accessible through an Internet-based protocol, e.g. XML, Web Services, or TCP/IP. Companies such as MapTuit, MapQuest, and NavTech support software that provides such maps and databases. Alternatively, software for mapping or geocoding the GPS data may be hosted on a user's personal computer.

[0050] FIG. 6 is a schematic drawing of a satellite-based wireless appliance 204 installed in a host vehicle 206 according to another embodiment of the present invention. The wireless appliance 204 may include some or all the features of the device shown in FIGS. 1 and 2 above, and additionally uses a patch antenna 200 adhered to the vehicle's windshield 201. Alternatively, the patch antenna 200 is embedded in the glass of the windshield 201. The antenna 200 transmits and receives data over the satellite network, which typically operates at

about 150 MHz. An electrical lead 202 connects the patch antenna 200 to the wireless appliance 204. In this configuration, the antenna 200 is concealed within the vehicle, making the wireless appliance 204 an effective tool for recovering a stolen vehicle.

[0051] FIG. 7 is a flowchart of a process 219 used by the wireless appliance of FIGS. 1 and 2 for selecting a network by which to transmit diagnostic and/or location-based data packets according to an embodiment of the present invention. In task 220, the radio modem determines a signal strength, or 'RSSI' value, for transmitting data over the terrestrial network. The radio modem may determine the RSSI value by detecting a signal through its antenna and analyzing the signal with an internal electronics system. The process determines if the RSSI is less than -100dB (task 222).

[0052] If the RSSI value is less than this value, indicating a weak signal that is inadequate for transmitting data, the process transmits the data packet through the satellite network using the satellite modem (task 230). In this case, the satellite network receives the data packet (task 231) and sends it to a data center. The data center routes the packet to a gateway software piece located at an IP address included in the packet's header. The gateway software piece includes a section of computer code, called an adaptor, which processes the packet from the satellite network (task 232). Processing typically involves parsing the packet to remove data from its payload and the host vehicle's identification from its header. Using this information, the process then inserts the data in the appropriate location in a database (task 234) for further processing.

[0053] Alternatively, an RSSI value greater than -100dB indicates that the terrestrial network is adequate to transmit the packet. In this case, the process transmits the packet through the terrestrial network using the radio modem (task 224). The terrestrial network receives the packet (task 226) and, similar to before, routes it to the gateway software piece described above where it is processed with a second adaptor (task 228). The adaptor parses the payload and

vehicle identification from the packet and inserts the data in the database (task 234) for further processing.

[0054] FIG. 8 is a schematic drawing of a wireless appliance 90 according to another embodiment of the present invention. The wireless appliance 90 features an interface board 80 that connects through a first cable 84 to a wireless terrestrial modem 31, and through a second cable 85 to a wireless satellite modem 42. The interface board 80 is typically a stand-alone unit that enables the wireless appliance 90 to use the satellite modem 42 as a fail-over transmission system as described above. Both the terrestrial modem 31 and satellite modem 42 typically connect to other electrical modules, such as those shown in FIG. 2 but not indicated in FIG. 8, in order to wirelessly transmit diagnostic and location-based data from a host vehicle.

[0055] The interface board 80 allows the satellite modem 42 to be easily connected and disconnected from the terrestrial modem 31 and its associated electronics. For example, the satellite modem 42 may be disconnected from the wireless appliance 90 during a manufacturing process if the appliance is fabricated for a customer based in a region that features adequate terrestrial wireless coverage. Alternatively, the satellite modem may be connected to the appliance during manufacturing if the customer is in a remote area that does not feature adequate terrestrial wireless coverage, and thus requires satellite coverage.

[0056] The interface board 80 features a serial communication module 81 that manages communication between the terrestrial modem 31 and the satellite modem 42. During operation, for example, the serial communication module 81 collects data sent from the wireless terrestrial modem 31 through the first cable 84 via a serial communication protocol (e.g., RS232). If necessary, the serial communication module 81 converts the serial communication protocol to one that is accepted by the satellite modem 42 (e.g., TTL), and then sends the data through the second cable 85 to the satellite modem 42. The data are then transmitted as described above. If

no conversion is necessary, the serial communication module 81 relays the data from the terrestrial modem 31 to the satellite modem 42.

[0057] The interface board 80 additionally may include a power management module 82 that receives power from the power supply (39 in FIG. 2) associated with terrestrial modem 31 and converts it into power required for the satellite modem 42. For example, the satellite modem typically requires conditioned 12 volts, and can draw as much as 3 amps during a transmission. During operation, the power management module 82 converts input power into this load in order to operate the satellite modem.

[0058] Other embodiments are also within the scope of the invention. In particular, a variety of algorithms can be used to determine if data should be transmitted over the terrestrial or satellite networks. For example, the wireless appliance may include a pre-programmed table in its memory module that correlates the vehicle's location (e.g., latitude and longitude) with the coverage of the satellite and terrestrial networks. In this case, the microprocessor analyzes the GPS data, refers to the pre-programmed table to determine the appropriate network for transmission, and then transmits the data. In other embodiments, the microprocessor simultaneously transmits data over both networks.

[0059] The satellite modem can be attached to the wireless appliance using a variety of configurations. For example, the satellite modem can be included within a housing that contains the wireless appliance. Alternatively, the satellite modem can be external to the appliance and attached using a serial cable. In other embodiments, the wireless appliance can include an auxiliary port into which the satellite modem plugs.

[0060] In other embodiments, the respective software adaptor for the satellite or terrestrial networks may receive packets through Internet-based protocols (e.g., TCP/IP), or through a private network (e.g., a frame-relay circuit). Alternatively, the software adaptor may receive the packets through conventional e-mail.

[0061] In still other embodiments, the satellite modem and/or terrestrial modem may be fabricated directly on a motherboard included in the wireless appliance. In this case, a reference design describing the modem is incorporated into the overall design of the motherboard.

[0062] A variety of logic diagrams and corresponding circuits can be used to implement protocols such as J1850 PWM/VPWM, ISO 9141-2, CAN, KWP2000, and J1708. These protocols can be implemented using integrated silicon-based solutions (e.g., a custom ASIC), or using transistors or conventional circuit elements. Similarly, hardware architectures other than those described above can be used for a wireless appliance. For example, the ARM7 microprocessor used to run the appliance's firmware may be contained within the GPS module or a wireless modem. Or a different microprocessor, such as an Intel-based X86 or Pentium processor, may be used. And the antennae for both the satellite and terrestrial modems and the GPS module can be implemented using different configurations. In one embodiment, for example, all antennae may be implemented as discrete circuits directly onto a circuit board. Similarly, active antennae, which are conventionally used for GPS, may also be used for the radio antenna connected to a wireless modem. In another embodiment, the internal battery may include a solar cell.

[0063] In another embodiment, the wireless appliance includes devices that transmit data over local wireless networks, such as 802.11b or Bluetooth-based networks. For example, the wireless appliance may communicate using Bluetooth with a driver's cellular telephone. In this case, the wireless appliance may include hardware and software so that the wireless appliance functions as a hands-free kit that allows the driver to talk on the cellular telephone without actually holding the telephone.

[0064] In yet another embodiment, a wiring harness may be used to attach the wireless appliance to the host vehicle's diagnostic connector. This allows the wireless appliance to be hidden in the vehicle, thereby making the device effective for recovery of stolen vehicles.

[0065] The packets described above may be transmitted at pre-set time intervals (e.g., every 20 minutes for diagnostic data; every minute for GPS data). Alternatively or additionally, the transmission may be performed when authorized by a user of the system (e.g., using a button on the website). In still other embodiments, the transmission is performed when a data parameter (e.g., engine coolant temperature or a vehicle's location) exceeds or roams outside of a predetermined value. Or a third party, such as a call center, may prompt transmission and/or analysis of data.

[0066] In other embodiments, the modem used to transmit GPS data may employ a terrestrial GPS system, such as a network-assisted GPS available on chipsets designed by Qualcomm, Inc. In this case GPS data is determined by processing data from both satellites and terrestrial base stations. In other embodiments, the GPS system may process signals generated by analog or digital television transmitters to determine the vehicle's location. In addition, the wireless appliance may be interfaced to other sensors deployed in the vehicle to monitor additional data. For example, sensors for measuring tire pressure and temperature may be deployed in the vehicle and interfaced to the appliance so that data relating the tires' performance can be transmitted to the host computer system. These data can then be further analyzed along with the diagnostic and GPS data. Accelerometers can also be used as sensors to detect collisions. In other embodiments, the appliance may include I/O hardware to process analog or digital signals from a heavy-duty vehicle. For example, the appliance can process an analog signal from a "bucket truck" to determine the time period that the hydraulic bucket is raised. This time period can then be sent wirelessly to the central computer system as described above.

[0067] In still other embodiments, other location-based applications can be combined with the above-mentioned mapping capabilities to provide real-time internet-based services involving maps. For example, data indicating traffic can be combined with mapping software to

generate internet-based, real-time traffic maps that graphically indicate traffic patterns. In this case data such as vehicle speed can be generated and transmitted by the in-vehicle wireless appliance described above. These data can also be used, for example, to generate an optimum travel route that minimizes traffic delays. Similarly, algorithms used to calculate vehicle emissions can be combined with the mapping software to generate real-time emissions maps that graphically indicate pollutants such as oxides of nitrogen, carbon monoxide, or hydrocarbon emissions. Additionally, algorithms for routing vehicles to a target destination may be used with the mapping software.

[0068] The foregoing description of the various embodiments of the present invention is provided to enable any person skilled in the art to make and use the present invention and its embodiments. Various modifications to these embodiments are possible, and the generic principles presented herein may be applied to other embodiments as well.

[0069] For instance, in still other embodiments, the above-described system is used to locate vehicles or things other than cars and trucks, such as industrial equipment or shipping containers.

[0070] Further, some embodiments of the present invention may be implemented in part or in whole as a hard-wired circuit, as a circuit configuration fabricated into an application-specific integrated circuit, or as a firmware program loaded into non-volatile storage, or a software program loaded from or into a data storage medium as machine-readable code. Such machine-readable code may include instructions executable by an array of logic elements, such as a microprocessor or other digital signal-processing unit.

[0071] It will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art that some of the embodiments as described hereinabove may be implemented in many different embodiments of software, firmware, and hardware in the entities illustrated in the figures. The actual software code or specialized control hardware used to implement some of the present embodiments is not

limiting of the present invention. Thus, the operation and behavior of the embodiments are described without specific reference to the actual software code or specialized hardware components. The absence of such specific references is feasible because it is clearly understood that artisans of ordinary skill would be able to design software and control hardware to implement the embodiments of the present invention based on the description herein with only a reasonable effort and without undue experimentation.

[0072] Moreover, the processes associated with some of the present embodiments may be executed by programmable equipment, such as computers. Software that may cause programmable equipment to execute the processes may be stored in any storage device, such as, for example, a computer system (non-volatile) memory, an optical disk, magnetic tape, or magnetic disk. Furthermore, some of the processes may be programmed when the computer system is manufactured or via a computer-readable medium at a later date. Such a medium may include any of the forms listed above with respect to storage devices and may further include, for example, a carrier wave modulated, or otherwise manipulated, to convey instructions that can be read, demodulated/decoded and executed by a computer.

[0073] It can be appreciated, for example, that some process aspects described herein may be performed, in certain embodiments, using instructions stored on a computer-readable medium or media that direct a computer system to perform the process aspects. A computer-readable medium can include, for example, memory devices such as diskettes, compact discs of both read-only and writeable varieties, optical disk drives, and hard disk drives. A computer-readable medium can also include memory storage that can be physical, virtual, permanent, temporary, semi-permanent and/or semi-temporary. A computer-readable medium can further include one or more data signals transmitted on one or more carrier waves.

[0074] A “computer” or “computer system” may be, for example, a wireless or wireline variety of a microcomputer, minicomputer, laptop, personal data assistant (PDA), wireless e-

mail device (e.g., BlackBerry), cellular phone, pager, processor, or any other programmable device, which devices may be capable of configuration for transmitting and receiving data over a network. Computer devices disclosed herein can include memory for storing certain software applications used in obtaining, processing and communicating data. It can be appreciated that such memory can be internal or external. The memory can also include any means for storing software, including a hard disk, an optical disk, floppy disk, ROM (read only memory), RAM (random access memory), PROM (programmable ROM), EEPROM (electrically erasable PROM), and other computer-readable media.

[0075] It is to be understood that the figures and descriptions of the present invention have been simplified to illustrate elements that are relevant for a clear understanding of the present invention, while eliminating, for purposes of clarity, other elements. Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that these and other elements may be desirable. However, because such elements are well known in the art, and because they do not facilitate a better understanding of the present invention, a discussion of such elements is not provided herein.

[0076] In some embodiments of the present invention disclosed herein, a single component can be replaced by multiple components, and multiple components replaced by a single component, to perform a given function or functions. Except where such substitution would not be operative to practice embodiments of the present invention, such substitution is within the scope of the present invention.